

BOJANA D. VIDOVIĆ*

Obrazovni sistem „Ruđer Bošković“

ANALYSIS OF ASSIGNMENTS IN INTENSIVE BUSINESS ENGLISH VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

Abstract: English for specific purposes (ESP), designed to meet specific needs of the learner, differs from General English (GE) not only in the existence of the need, but an awareness of the need, the target situation (Hutchinson and Waters). This paper argues that emphasizing the target situation can help learners activate their “intrinsic” motivation (Brown) and perceive the two types of motivation, which Gardner and Lambert called “instrumental” and “integrative,” as organically related. This “sense of purpose” is especially important for Business English, where performance objectives take priority over educational objectives (Ellis and Johnson). A particularly challenging aspect of Business English is vocabulary, since a considerable percentage of economics and finance terms have a different general meaning. A useful strategy for overcoming this is Thornbury’s concept of building vocabulary networks of association, a strategy applied in an exercise in testing intensive Business English vocabulary acquisition with students of an in-house course. Preparing for a target situation in context, and perceiving language as a means to an end, proved more efficient than preparing for a written test and taking language as a goal in itself.

Key words: Business English, strategies for learning vocabulary, intrinsic motivation, assignment, presentation, practical application, memory

* bojana.vidovic@boskovic.edu.rs

INTRODUCTION

Interest in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) emerged relatively late in the twentieth century, when the focus of linguistics shifted from grammar to communication (Widdowson, 1978). Even though the idea of ESP was recognized in 1960s, it is still not always obvious what it is (for a most recent overview, see Hyland, 2022). Indicatively, Hutchinson and Waters in their *English for Specific Purposes* begin with emphasizing at length what it is *not*:

ESP is not a particular kind of language or methodology, nor does it consist of a particular type of teaching material. Understood properly, it is an approach to language learning, which is based on learner need... [It should be viewed not as a] particular language product but as an approach to language teaching which is directed by specific and apparent reasons for learning (Hutchinson and Waters, 1991: 19; cf. 18).

They presented a division of English Language Teaching (ELT) on a tree diagram, where the trunk branches out into specializations. The branch of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) breaks down into General English (GE) for school, and ESP, which contains three branches: English for Social Sciences (ESS), English for Business and Economics (EBE), and English for Science and Technology (EST); all of these three can be further divided according to their application for academic and occupational purposes (EAP and EOP). The bottom of the trunk is “language teaching” while the roots are equal parts “learning” and “communication” (Hutchinson and Waters, 1991: 19).

Dudley-Evans and St John, in *Developments in English for Specific Purposes*, systematize the characteristics of ESP into “absolute” and “variable” (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998: 4):

Absolute characteristics:

- ESP is designed to meet specific needs of the learners;
- ESP makes use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves;
- ESP is centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre.

Variable characteristics:

- ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
- ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English;

- ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work setting, but it could also be designed for secondary school level;
- ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students;
- Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems.

ESP MOTIVATION

Gardener and Lambert (1972) posited a distinction between “integrative” and “instrumental” motivation. The former is based on students’ learning for personal improvement and intellectual enrichment, while the latter is derived from practical, concrete ends, whereby students learn a language primarily because they need to, not necessarily because they want to. Brown (2007: 168-175) classifies factors of intrinsic motivation, such as language competence as a personal goal, and extrinsic motivation, e.g., tests and exams.

One hypothesis that will be tested below is that the more these two modes of motivation are experienced as organically related, the more efficient the learners’ engagement in the learning process will be. Since teaching ESP, being inherently goal-oriented, consists of identifying, structuring, and addressing learners’ specific needs, the key is to stimulate a positive attitude towards learning by activating learners’ intrinsic motivation. This means organizing the learning process in such a way that the learners realize that, simply put, what they will externally need is what they actually want. Transforming extrinsic motivation from a test to a practical situation changes the perspective from fulfilling a requirement to actively applying the knowledge.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

The prerequisite of motivating ESP students is adjusting the course to their needs (Flowerdew, 2013). Just like in GE, ESP teacher’s roles may and should vary, from being a controller, an organizer or a prompter, to being a participant, a tutor or an observer (Harmer, 2006: 57-64); similarly, Scrivener (2005: 25) identifies the three teachers’ roles as explainer, involver, and enabler (compare the student survey results in Pešić and Marinković, 2018: 707: “instructor, motivator, lecturer/model, supervisor, examiner, guide and mentor”). Even though both GE and ESP teaching involves organizing adequate course material and activities and setting tasks and objectives judiciously, the potentially decisive difference is underlined by Swales (1985), who uses the term “ESP practitioner” rather than “ESP teacher” (see also Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998: 13). The ESP ‘instructor’ (to use a neutral term) should therefore be, ideally, well familiar with the field in question and attuned to the priority of direction: the guiding principle is the specific target situation towards which the learner is

heading.

This is especially relevant for Business English, for several reasons. The field is extremely broad and in continuous development, to the point that the instructor's competence becomes necessarily limited. As the course progresses deeper into the specificities of the profession, the learners will have a better understanding of and closer familiarity with the target situation than their instructor will. Thus, occasionally, and after a certain point even regularly, the instructors need to format their role as less of a leading authority than a constructive and corrective follower (see the formula of Zalipyatskikh, 2017: 374: "students bring the subject + I bring the language = together we create the language for specific purposes," cited in Prtljaga and Gojkov Rajić, 2018: 720). It should always be kept in mind that in Business English "performance objectives take priority over educational objectives or language learning for its own sake" (Ellis and Johnson, 1994: 7).

BUSINESS ENGLISH

Due to the global dominance of English as the language of technology and commerce, it became "indispensable" (Tietze, 2004: 176) and indeed "*the* dominant language in international business" (Ehrenreich, 2010: 408, original emphasis; see also Ehrenreich, 2011, Janssens and Steyaert, 2014, Ehrenreich, 2016; for a detailed discussion of the concept of English as a [business] lingua franca/[B]ELF, see Komori-Glatz, 2018). Business English thus occupies a separate slot within ESP. Not only do "different genres of writing and speaking provoke different language use" broadly speaking, but it is the "specific vocabulary that differentiates Business English from GE" (Harmer, 2006: 14). While it "shares the important elements of needs analysis, syllabus design, course design, and materials selection and development which are common to all fields of work in ESP" (Ellis and Johnson, 1994: 3), a set of criteria classify it in the category of "special" English. Some of the more prominent are the importance of "intercultural awareness" (Baker, 2011; see also Tietze, 2004, Pullin, 2010, Fall et al., 2013), a constant need for efficient and straightforward professional communication (Kankaanranta and Plancken, 2010; Kassis-Henderson and Louhiala-Salminen, 2011), and, perhaps most importantly, the "sense of purpose": the users know exactly why they are learning English language in such a form (Ellis and Johnson, 1994: 10-13). Teaching Business English should thus focus on students' concrete and current occupational and professional needs (Donna, 2000: 6).

One of the main differences between ESP and GE is not only the existence of the need, but an awareness of the need, that is, the awareness of a target situation (Hutchinson and Waters, 1991: 53). Further, there is a distinction between "target needs," that is, "what the learner needs to do in the target situation," and "learning needs," being "what the learner needs to do in order to learn" (Hutchinson and Waters, 1991: 54). As they vividly elaborate,

the learning process is a journey,

in which the target situation analysis can determine the destination; it can also act as a compass on the journey to give general direction, but we must choose our route according to the vehicles and guides available (i.e., the conditions of the learning situation), the existing roads within the learner's mind (i.e., their knowledge, skills and strategies) and the learners' motivation for travelling (Hutchinson and Waters, 1991: 62).

To continue this metaphor, this journey becomes much more demanding in Business English waters in large part because of the target situation. International Business English (or Business English as a Lingua Franca: see the distinctions of Nickerson and Planken, 2016), is "perceived as an enabling resource to get work done. Since it is highly context-bound and situation-specific, it is a *moving target* defying linguistic description" (Kanraanranta, Louhiala-Salminen & Karhunen, 2015: 129, emphasis mine). The stakes can become high, since "in the workplace, the ability to communicate as an insider is increasingly recognised as a marker of professional expertise" (Hyland, 2022: 215; see also Douglas, 2013: 369, who notes that "language knowledge and background knowledge are very difficult to distinguish in practice and [...] competence in specific purpose fields [...] is inextricably linked to language performance in those fields").

One particularly significant component of mastering Business English is vocabulary. According to Nation (2008: 10), "technical vocabularies [...] probably range in size from around 1,000 words to 5,000 words depending on the subject area" (cited in Coxhead, 2013: 116, followed by a detailed discussion of methodological challenges in identifying and classifying terms as technical). Wherever within this range one places Business English, this sector imposes an additional task of navigating through polysemy. According to one recent, extensive analysis of a 6 million-word corpus, there are over 800 economics and finance terms with different general meaning (Ha and Hyland, 2017). For the sake of illustration, let us cross this number with Nation's estimates of 1,000 to 5,000 items in technical vocabularies. The result would be that anywhere between 15% and an astounding 80% of Business English technical vocabulary consists of words and expressions that in different contexts mean something else. This is potentially a considerable challenge:

These everyday words with specialized meanings could present some difficulties for teachers as learners struggle to learn new meanings and concepts for words that are already established in their lexicon in a particular way [...] This new technical meaning requires [...] learners to build their knowledge of both the concept of a word and its meaning. (Coxhead, 2013: 127)

SOME STRATEGIES FOR LEARNING VOCABULARY

The central message of Thornbury's *How to Teach Vocabulary* is that knowing a word is more than knowing its form and meaning: "[L]earning a second language involves both learning a new conceptual system, and constructing a new vocabulary network – a second mental lexicon" (Thornbury, 2002: 18). In order to organize their mental lexicon, it is necessary that teachers enable the students to build their own "networks of association."

The meaning and usage of a word are better learned and remembered when placed in their typical context; collocations and word registers help construct and solidify the network of associations. This is especially helpful with words that are for various reasons difficult (pronunciation, spelling, multiple meanings, etc.). In addressing the task of optimizing learners' capacity for memorizing new vocabulary, Thornbury presents some of the principles that can help teachers to turn "quickly forgotten words" into "the never forgotten words" (Thornbury, 2002: 24-25). Among others, some important techniques of memorization of new words are "repetition" and "retrieval," that is, new words are less likely forgotten if they are used repeatedly. Especially noteworthy is his concept of "cognitive depth," by which he means that "the more decisions the learner makes about a word, and the more cognitively demanding these decisions, the better the word is remembered" (Thornbury, 2002: 25).

Other interesting strategies for building associative networks include "personal organizing" (reading aloud the sentences with new words or using these words in generating new sentences), and ordering words along the scale according to their meaning, which facilitates systematizing them in groups. One useful strategy for efficiently storing a word in long-term memory is visualizing it, pairing it with an associative image, or simply "imaging" (Redman 1991: 10). Lastly, an interesting but perhaps a risky mnemonic technique is the so-called "keyword technique," whereby a new word is associated with the pronunciation of a word, or keyword, familiar from another language (for limitations of this technique, see e.g., Hall et al., 1981).

VOCABULARY ASSIGNMENTS

The initial assumption was that preparing for a context-based assignment would be more efficient than memorizing vocabulary as a goal in itself. This assumption was tested by comparative analysis of efficiency of different strategies of learning vocabulary during a customized in-house course in Business English organized from Fall 2022 to Summer 2023 for a business and policy strategy agency. The group consisted of 12 adult employees from roughly the same middle level of the agency's professional structure (that is, without the top management and the technical staff). Starting with different proficiency levels, at the end of

the course, everyone in the group was at or around the B1 level (for a sample of the step-by-step sequence of exercises that helped them arrive to that level, see Vidović, 2023).

Towards the end of the course, everyone in the group was tasked with learning a set of 40 new words and expressions within a week. They were given the alphabetical list of words supplied with short explanations and, where possible, synonyms. The selection of words was intentionally mixed. Some were ordinary words with a specific meaning in business-related context, more or less removed from its non-business usage. These included, among others: *active* (recent or frequent, e.g., customer); *to charge* (to buy on credit); *maker* (person authorized to sign a check); *to clear* (to earn net profit); *minutes* (record of a business meeting); *peak* (period of highest demand); *principal* (a person who designates another to act on their behalf); *probation* (testing of a candidate), and so on. The list featured a certain amount of business jargon, such as: *call-back pay* (additional pay); *exit interview* (formal meeting between the management and an employee leaving the firm); *foreman* (experienced employee supervising the junior employees); *hot stove rule* (transparent, objective, and strict disciplinary policy); *superleadership* (situation where a leader gradually turns over authority, power, and responsibilities to a self-managing team), and so on (all the items were given after entries in *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*; the term and concept of “superleadership” was introduced by Manz and Sims 1989).

All of the course-takers were given a choice between two types of assignment for testing the vocabulary. One was to read an unknown, relatively straightforward narrative text with 30 slots left blank for inserting the words and expressions they had assigned, by choosing one out of three offered for each blank, so out of 90 words in total. That total number included 30 out of the 40 vocabulary items they had been assigned, and another 60 of various other words and expressions. The multiple choice offers typically consisted of the required answer (vocabulary items from the list) and similar expressions, meant as an association; the selection included only variations of isolated items, not variation of idioms (which might have been a considerable challenge: Parizoska and Rajh 2017). Where possible, one of the wrong answers was designed as more obviously wrong; for example, *exit interview* was coupled with *leaving conversation* and *farewell address*. *Hot stone rule* was offered next to *firm regulation* and *cold rock rule*; *peak* next to *summit* and *leak*, *active* next to *regular* and *straight*, and *foreman* besides *manager* and *forerunner*, and so on. Occasionally, the choice consisted of phonetically similar words, e.g., *charge*, *forge*, and *chart*. The second assignment was to prepare a conversation during a business meeting, using no less than 30 vocabulary items from the list of 40 assigned.

The two assignments were intentionally designed to differ considerably but to end up as balanced as possible in terms of required effort. While the first assignment had the benefit of the multiple-choice option, the second theoretically allowed course-takers to eliminate 10

out of 40 assigned vocabulary items to learn – even though choosing 30 meant at least encountering all 40 (more below). Seven course-takers opted for the textual assignment, the remaining five for the conversation; those five were then divided in two subgroups, of two and three members, to prepare separately. Since the whole point of the exercise was to compare the efficiency of two different kinds of preparation, both the textual and the conversation groups had to be somehow assessed by the same criterion. Therefore, after the week had passed, before the second group got to their presentations, they were asked to fill the blanks in the text as well. The summary of the results of each group is as follows.

From the first group, only one course-taker completed 16 out of 30 vocabulary items assigned, while the remaining six managed to answer correctly between 7 and 13. Since only one scored above half, the group average was well below 50%. The second group scored noticeably better. Only one course-taker demonstrated memory of exactly half of the assigned vocabulary items (15/30), with the other four scoring higher, ranging from 19 to 27; the second-group's average was nearly 70%.

Clearly, interpreting these results requires certain reservations. The overall number of course-takers assessed above is relatively small, and the comparison could not have been conducted as a scientific experiment with controlled variables; for example, there is no way of knowing how much time each course-taker spent in preparing for the assessment, or if some of them already knew some of the vocabulary from elsewhere. Still, some broader remarks can be made.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The goal of this kind of comparison of different ways of learning vocabulary was to try to gauge which of the two is more efficient in keeping new vocabulary active for other uses. The initial assumption was that learning vocabulary for immediate practical application would be more successful than passively memorizing items from a list and delivering them when prompted. In that sense, the expectation proved correct. The second group scored better, even on the fill-in-the-blanks assignment for which they did not specifically prepare. Indeed, in evaluating their performance, one might even take into account that out of the 40 items initially assigned, on the written assignment they were tested on the randomly chosen 30 items, not on those exact 30 that they themselves chose for preparing their own conversation assignment (even though they likely considered all 40 in the process).

Even though both groups expected to see the new words and expressions in some business-related context, the first one had to prepare for identifying them in an unknown text, while the second one was proactively preparing a specific context of their choosing. In effect, the second group had the advantage of what Thornbury calls “cognitive depth,” that is,

learning by making informed decisions about each word. Whether the course-takers were aware of it or not, the conversation assignment practically required making the decisions about the vocabulary items in advance, on the participants' own terms; those who chose the written assignment postponed that crucial effort: they had to invest the bulk of it during the limited time of the assessment itself.

Likewise, the second group built a more long-term network of associations by pairing the new information – assigned vocabulary items – to what they are already familiar with, that is, a business setting in whichever language; this associative imaging contributed to turning the new vocabulary into “never-,” or at least “not-so-easily-forgotten” words.

Most significantly, the outcome of the exercise can be interpreted with regards to the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in ESP learning discussed above (Gardener and Lambert 1972; Brown 2007). The first group expected to be essentially passively tested and was thus motivated extrinsically. By contrast, the second group was motivated intrinsically, as they actively took the initiative in creating a target situation and preparing for it. In other words, for the first group, the assigned vocabulary was the goal, while for the second it was the means to an end. To recall Hutchinson and Waters' metaphor of “learners' motivation for travelling” (above), for the first group the vocabulary was the destination, whereas the second conceived of it as a vehicle towards the destination.

Lastly, one reason for the first group's relative underperformance might be that they relied on the multiple-choice offer and the possibility of completing the task with guesswork if necessary. On the other hand, the oral presentations for which the second group prepared required fluency and accuracy in real time, without the opportunity of improvising on the spot. This leads to one further, potentially relevant question of why some course-takers chose one of the two assignments in the first place. Without actual psychological testing, one can speculate that those who opted for the written assignment perhaps felt relatively less confident with performing before a group – which might (though not necessarily) indicate that they had less confidence in their language proficiency as such (for the complex relation between autonomy and motivation, see Spratt, Humphries and Chan 2002: 260-262).

Here we recall that all the course-takers are workplace colleagues, who had been attending the course together for almost a year before this exercise took place, by which time they were all on a similar language proficiency level. In other words, if it was stage fright and lack of confidence that discouraged the seven in the textual group from choosing a presentation before their peers, under such circumstances an instructor might do well to insist on precisely that (for an optimistic call for “encouraging students of lower levels of proficiency to undertake this task,” see Vlahović 2018; compare also the survey analysis in Šipragić Đokić et al. 2018). After all, adult professionals on responsible business positions

might often not even have the option of replacing real-time oral communication with another channel of conveying information, regardless of possibly different learning styles they might personally prefer (for expectations from adult learners, see Knowles, Holton and Swanson 2014, esp. p. 22).

All of the above might yield some broader insights into the role of the teacher, or “practitioner,” in Business English. While all the assessed course-takers are competent in their respective fields – much more so than their instructor – one should not expect them to be aware of the most efficient methods of language learning for their particular needs. Simply put, they do not always recognize what learning strategy is in their best interest (for a discussion on successful learning strategies in adult age, see Stanojević Gocić 2018). The instructor should therefore stimulate them to active participation in the learning process, in large part because of the central importance of “performance objectives” for Business English.

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BOJANA D. VIDOVIĆ

ANALIZA ZADATAKA IZ UBRZANOG USVAJANJA POSLOVNOG VOKABULARA U OKVIRU ENGLESKOG JEZIKA STRUKE

Rezime: U radu se razmatra nastava poslovnog engleskog jezika (Business English) kao zasebne kategorije engleskog kao stranog jezika, na primeru usvajanja stručnog vokabulara. Poslovni engleski odlikuju mnoge sličnosti sa engleskim jezikom struke (English for Specific Purposes – ESP), poput analize potreba, prilagođavanja materijala, i sl., ali i neke specifičnosti, kao što je svest o konkretnoj praktičnoj primeni i efikasnosti kao ključnim ciljevima učenja. Posebna pažnja posvećena je vrsti motivacije: spoljašnjoj (*extrinsic*), koja se svodi na potrebu za uspehom na ispitu kao krajnjem cilju, i unutrašnjoj (*intrinsic*), koja podrazumeva *želju* da se materijom ovlada. Te specifičnosti uzete su kao pretpostavka vežbe sprovedene u sklopu tečaja poslovnog engleskog prilagođenog za potrebe jedne konsultantske agencije za strategiju upravljanja poslovanjem i javnim politikama, držanog tokom 2022/23. Spisak odabranih reči i izraza koje se koriste u poslovnom okruženju, kao i primeri određenog poslovnog žargona, zadat je grupi od 12 polaznika, pri čemu im je prepušten izbor načina ispitivanja. Ispitanici koji su odabrali polaganje putem odabira od ponuđenih reči u tekstu sa prazninama pokazali su niži nivo savladavanja zadatka od onih koji su se opredelili da nove odrednice primene u vidu unapred pripremljenog dijaloga na zamišljenom poslovnom sastanku. Uz sve neophodne rezerve, neki od zaključaka su da se učenje u kontekstu pokazalo efikasnijim od učenja izolovanih izraza sa spiska, pored ostalog i stoga što podstiče unutrašnju motivaciju. Jedna od uloga nastavnika je i da polaznike usmeri ka efikasnijem načinu usvajanja i primene znanja.

Ključne reči: poslovni engleski, strategije učenja vokabulara, unutrašnja motivacija, praktična primena, zadaci, prezentacija, pamćenje

Datum prijema: 31.8.2023.

Datum ispravki: 29.11.2023. / 6.12.2023.

Datum odobrenja: 6.12.2023.